without a craze. Each new one was as fleeting as the last, but to each she brought the same delightfully insincere enthusiasm, the same picturesque devotion. Each was a pose, but she posed so sweetly that nobody lost patience.

"You mustn't laugh!" she protested, letting the kitten slip to the ground. "I've had lessons at five guineas each from the most fascinating person—a professional; and I'm becoming quite an adept. Of course I haven't been much beyond the milky appearance yet, but the milky appearance is everything, you know; the rest will come. I am trying to persuade Blanche to let me have a pavilion at her party in March, and gaze for all you dull political people." Again she smiled.

Chilcote smiled as well. "How is it done?" he asked, momentarily amused.

"Oh, the doing is quite delicious. You sit at a table with the ball in front of you; then you take the subject's hands, spread them out on the table, and stroke them very softly while you gaze into the crystal; that gets up the sympathy, you know." She looked up innocently. "Shall I show you?"

Chilcote moved a small table nearer to the couch and spread his hands upon it, palms downward. "Like this, eh?" he said. Then a ridiculous nervousness seized him and he moved away. "Some other day," he said quickly. "You can show me some other day. I'm not very fit this afternoon."

If Lillian felt any disappointment, she showed none. "Poor old thing!" she said, softly. "Try to sit here by me and we won't bother about anything." She made a place for him beside her, and as he dropped into it she took his hand and patted it sympathetically.

The touch was soothing, and he bore it patiently enough. After a moment she lifted the hand with a little exclamation of reproof.

"You degenerate person! You have ceased to manicure. What has become of my excellent training?"

Chilcote laughed. "Run to seed," he said, lightly. Then his expression and tone changed. "When a man gets to my age," he added, "little social luxuries don't seem worth while; the social necessities are irksome enough. Personally, I envy the beggar in the street—exempt from shaving; exempt from washing"—

Lillian raised her delicate eyebrows. The sentiment was beyond her perception.

"But manicuring," she said, reproachfully, "when you have such nice hands. It was your hands and your eyes, you know, that first appealed to me." She sighed gently, with a touch of sentimental remembrance. "And I thought it so strong of you not to wear rings—it must be such a temptation." She looked down at her own fingers, glittering with jewels.

But the momentary pleasure of her touch was gone. Chilcote drew away his hand and picked up the book that lay between them.

"Other Men's Shoes!" he read. "A novel, of course?"

She smiled. "Of course. Such a fantastic story. Two men changing identities."

Chilcote rose and walked back to the mantelpiece.

"Changing identities?" he said with a touch of interest.

"Yes. One man is an artist, the other a millionaire; one wants to know what fame is like, the other wants to know how it feels to be really sinfully rich. So they exchange experiences for a month." She laughed.

Chilcote laughed as well. "But how?" he asked.

"Oh, I told you the idea was absurd. Fancy two people so much alike that neither their friends nor their servants see any difference! Such a thing couldn't be, could it?"

Chilcote looked down at the fire. "No," he said, doubtfully. "No. I suppose not."

"Of course not. There are likenesses, but not freak likenesses like that."

Chilcote's head was bent as she spoke, but at the last words he lifted it.

"By Jove! I don't know about that!" he said. "Not so very long ago I saw two men so much alike that I—I"— He stopped.

Lillian smiled.

He colored quickly. "You doubt me?" he asked.

"My dear Jack!" Her voice was delicately reproachful.

"Then you think that my—my imagination has been playing me tricks?"

"My dear boy! Nothing of the kind. Come back to your place and tell me the whole tale?" She smiled again, and patted the couch invitingly.

But Chilcote's balance had been upset. For the first time he saw Lillian as one of the watchful, suspecting crowd before which he was constantly on guard. Acting on the sensation, he moved suddenly toward the door.

"I—I have an appointment at the House," he said, quickly. "I'll look in another day when—when I'm better company. I know I'm a bear today. My nerves, you know." He came back to the couch and took her hand; then he touched her cheek for an instant with his fingers.

"Good-by," he said. "Take care of yourself—and the kitten," he added, with forced gayety, as he crossed the room.

That afternoon Chilcote's nervous condition reached its height. All day he had avoided the climax, but no evasion can be eternal, and this he realized as he sat in his place on the Opposition benches during the half hour of wintry twilight that precedes the turning-on of the lights. He realized it in that half hour, but the application of the knowledge followed later, when the time came for him to question the government on some point relating to a proposed additional dry-dock at Talkley, the naval base. Then for the first time he knew that the sufferings of the past months could have a visible as well as a hidden side—could disorganize his daily routine as they had already demoralized his will and character.

The thing came upon him with extraordinary lack of preparation. He sat through the twilight with tolerable calm, his nervousness showing only in the occasional lifting of his hand to his collar and the frequent changing of his position; but when the lights were turned on, and he leaned back in his seat with closed eyes, he became conscious of a curious impression—a disturbing idea that through his closed lids he could see the faces on the opposite side of the House, see the rows of eyes, sleepy, interested, or vigilant. Never before had the sensation presented itself, but, once set up, it ran through all his susceptibilities. By an absurd freak of fancy those varying eyes seemed to pierce through his lids, almost through his eyeballs. The cold perspiration that was his daily horror broke out on his forehead; and at the same moment Fraide, his leader, turned, leaned over the back of his seat, and touched his knee.

Chilcote started and opened his eyes. "I—I believe I was dozing," he said confusedly.

Fraide smiled his dry, kindly smile. "A fatal admission for a member of the Opposition," he said. "But I was looking for you earlier in the day, Chilcote. There is something behind this Persian affair. I believe it to be a mere first move on Russia's part. You big trading people will find it worth watching."

Chilcote shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "I scarcely believe in it. Lakely put a match to the powder in the St. George's, but 'twill only be a noise and a puff of smoke."

But Fraide did not smile. "What is the feeling down at Wark?" he asked. "Has it awakened any interest?"

"At Wark? Oh, I—I don't quite know. I have been a little out of touch with Wark in the last few weeks. A man has so many private affairs to look to"— He was uneasy under his chief's scrutiny.

Fraide's lips parted as if to make reply, but with a certain dignified reticence he closed them again and turned away.

Chilcote leaned back in his place and furtively passed his hand over his forehead. His mind was possessed by one consideration—the consideration of himself. He glanced down the crowded, lighted House to the big glass doors; he glanced about him at his colleagues, indifferent or interested; then surreptitiously his fingers strayed to his waistcoat pocket.

Usually he carried his morphia tabloids with him, but to-day by a lapse of memory he had left them at home. He knew this, nevertheless he continued to search, while the need of the drug rushed through him with a sense of physical sickness. He lost hold on the business of the House; unconsciously he half rose from his seat.

The man next him looked up. "Hold your ground, Chilcote," he said. "Rayforth is drying up."

With a wave of relief Chilcote dropped back into his place. Whatever the confusion in his mind, it was evidently not obvious in his face.

Rayforth resumed his seat, there was the usual slight stir and pause, then Salett, the member for Salchester, rose.

With Salett's first words Chilcote's hand again sought his pocket, and again his eyes strayed toward the doors, but Fraide's erect head and stiff back just in front of him held him quiet. With an effort he pulled out his notes and smoothed them nervously; but though his gaze was fixed on the pages, not a line of Blessington's clear writing reached his mind. He glanced at the face of the Speaker, then at the faces on the Treasury bench, then once more he leaned back in his seat.

The man beside him saw the movement. "Funking the dry-dock?" he whispered, jestingly.

"No"—Chilcote turned to him suddenly—"but I feel beastly—have felt beastly for weeks."

The other looked at him more closely. "Anything wrong?" he asked. It was a novel experience to be confided in by Chilcote.

"Oh, it's the grind—the infernal grind." As he said it, it seemed to him suddenly that his strength gave way. He forgot his companion, his position, everything except the urgent instinct that filled mind and body. Scarcely knowing what he did, he rose and leaned forward to whisper in Fraide's ear.

Fraide was seen to turn, his thin face interested and concerned, then he was seen to nod once or twice in acquiescence, and a moment later Chilcote stepped quietly out of his place.

One or two men spoke to him as he hurried from the House, but he shook them off almost uncivilly, and, making for the nearest exit, hailed a cab.

The drive to Grosvenor Square was a misery. Time after time he changed from one corner of the cab to the other, his acute internal pains prolonged by every delay and increased by every motion. At last, weak in all his limbs, he stepped from the vehicle at his own door.

Entering the house, he instantly mounted the stairs and passed to his own rooms. Opening the bedroom door he peered in cautiously, then pushed the door wide. The light had been switched on, but the room was empty. With a nervous excitement scarcely to be kept in check, he entered, shut and locked the door, then moved to the wardrobe, and, opening it, drew the tube of tabloids from the shelf.

His hand shook violently as he carried the tube to the table. The strain of the day, the anxiety of the past hours, with their final failure, had found sudden expression. Mixing a larger dose than any he had before allowed himself, he swallowed it hastily, and, walking across the room, threw himself, fully dressed, upon the bed.

IV.—A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE.

TO those whose sphere lies in the west of London, Fleet street is little more than a name, and Clifford's Inn a mere dead letter. Yet Clifford's Inn lies as safely stowed away in the shadow of the Law Courts as any grave under a country church wall; it is as green of grass, as gray of stone, as irresponsive to the passing footstep.

Facing the railed-in grass-plot of its little court stood the house in which John Loder had his rooms. Taken at a first glance, the house had the deserted air of an office, inhabited only in the early hours; but, as night fell, lights would be seen to show out, first on one floor, then on another—faint, human beacons unconsciously signalling each other. The rooms Loder inhabited were on the highest floor; and from their windows one might gaze philosophically on the tree-tops, forgetting the uneven pavement and the worn railing that hemmed them round. In the landing outside the rooms his name appeared above his door, but the paint had been soiled by time, and the letters for the most part reduced to shadows; so that, taken in conjunction with the gaunt staircase and bare walls, the place had a cheerless look.

Inside, however, the effect was somewhat mitigated. The room on the right hand, as one entered the small passage that served as hall, was of fair size, though low ceiled. The paint of the wall-panelling, like the name above the outer door, had long ago been worn to a dirty and nondescript hue, and the floor was innocent of carpet; yet in the middle of the room stood a fine old Cromwell table, and on the plain deal book-shelves and along the mantelpiece were some valuable books—political and historical. There were no curtains on the windows, and a common reading-lamp with a green shade stood on a desk. It was the room of a man with few hobbies and no pleasures—who existed because he was alive, and worked because he must.

Three nights after the great fog John Loder sat by his desk in the light of the green-shaded lamp. The remains of a very frugal supper stood on the centre-table, and in the grate a small and economical-looking fire was burning.

Having written for close on two hours, he pushed back his chair and stretched his cramped fingers; then he yawned, rose, and slowly walked across the room. Reaching the mantelpiece, he took a pipe from the pipe-rack and some tobacco from the jar that stood behind the books. His face looked tired and a little worn, as is common with men who have worked long at an uncongenial task. Shredding the tobacco between his hands, he slowly filled the pipe, then lighted it from the fire with a spill of twisted paper.

Almost at the moment that he applied the light the sound of steps mounting the uncarpeted stairs outside caught his attention, and he raised his head to listen.

Presently the steps halted and he heard a match struck. The stranger was evidently uncertain of his whereabouts. Then the steps moved forward again and paused.

An expression of surprise crossed Loder's face, and he laid down his pipe. As the visitor knocked, he walked quietly across the room and opened the door.

The passage outside was dark, and the new comer drew back before the light from the room.

"Mr. Loder?"—he began, interrogatively. Then all at once he laughed in embarrassed apology. "Forgive me," he said. "The light rather dazzled me. I didn't realize who it was."

Loder recognized the voice as belonging to his acquaintance of the fog.

"Oh, it's you!" he said. "Won't you come in?" His voice was a little cold. This sudden resurrection left him surprised—and not quite pleasantly surprised. He walked back to the fireplace, followed by his guest.

The guest seemed nervous and agitated. "I must apologize for the hour of my visit," he said. "My—my time is not quite my own."

Loder waved his hand. "Whose time is his own?" he said.

Chilcote, encouraged by the remark, drew nearer to the fire. Until this moment he had refrained from looking directly at his host; now, however, he raised his eyes, and, despite his preparation, he recoiled unavoidably before the extraordinary resemblance. Seen here, in the casual surroundings of a badly furnished and crudely lighted room, it was even more astounding than it had been in the mystery of the fog.

"Forgive me," he said again. "It is physical—purely physical. I am bowled over against my will."

Loder smiled. The slight contempt that Chilcote had first inspired rose again, and with it a second feeling less easily defined. The man seemed so unstable, so incapable, yet so grotesquely suggestive to himself.

"The likeness is rather overwhelming," he said; "but not heavy enough to sink under. Come nearer the fire. What brought you here? Curiosity?" There was a wooden armchair by the fireplace. He indicated it with a wave of the hand; then turned and took up his smouldering pipe.

Chilcote, watching him furtively, obeyed the gesture and sat down.

"It is extraordinary!" he said, as if unable to dismiss the subject. "It—it is quite extraordinary!"

The other glanced round. "Let's drop it," he said. "It's so confoundedly obvious." Then his tone changed. "Won't you smoke?" he asked.

"Thanks." Chilcote began to fumble for his cigarettes.

But his host forestalled him. Taking a box from the mantelpiece, he held it out.

"My one extravagance!" he said, ironically. "My resources bind me to one; and I think I have made a wise selection. It is about the only vice we haven't to pay for six times over." He glanced sharply at the face so absurdly like his own, then, lighting a fresh spill, offered his guest a light.

Chilcote moistened his cigarette and leaned forward. In the flare of the paper his face looked set and anxious, but Loder saw that the lips did not twitch as they had done on the previous occasion that he had given him a light, and a look of comprehension crossed his eyes.

"What will you drink? Or, rather, will you have a whiskey? I keep nothing else. Hospitality is one of the debarred luxuries."

Chilcote shook his head. "I seldom drink. But don't let that deter you."

Loder smiled. "I have one drink in the twenty-four hours—generally at two o'clock, when my night's work is done. A solitary man has to look where he is going."

"You work till two?"

"Two—or three."

Chilcote's eyes wandered to the desk. "You write?" he asked.

The other nodded curtly.

"Books?" Chilcote's tone was anxious.

Loder laughed, and the bitter note showed in his voice.

"No—not books," he said.

Chilcote leaned back in his chair and passed his hand across his face. The strong wave of satisfaction that the words woke in him was difficult to conceal.

"What is your work?"

Loder turned aside. "You must not ask that," he said, shortly. "When a man has only one capacity, and the capacity has no outlet, he is apt to run to seed in a wrong direction. I cultivate weeds—at abominable labor and a very small reward." He stood with his back to the fire, facing his visitor; his attitude was a curious blending of pride, defiance and despondency.

Chilcote leaned forward again. "Why speak of yourself like that? You are a man of intelligence and education." He spoke questioningly, anxiously.

"Intelligence and education!" Loder laughed shortly. "London is cemented with intelligence. And education! What is education? The court dress necessary to presentation, the wig and gown necessary to the barrister. But do the wig and gown necessarily mean briefs? Or the court dress royal favor? Education is the accessory; it is influence that is essential. You should know that."

Chilcote moved restlessly in his seat. "You talk bitterly," he said.

The other looked up. "I think bitterly, which is worse. I am one of the unlucky beggars who, in the expectation of money, has been denied a profession, even a trade, to which to cling in time of shipwreck; and who, when disaster comes, drift out to sea. I warned you the other night to steer clear of me. I come under the head of flotsam!"

Chilcote's face lighted. "You came a cropper?" he asked.

"No. It was some one else who came the cropper. I only dealt in results."

"Big results?"

"A drop from a probable eighty thousand pounds to a certain eight hundred."

Chilcote glanced up. "How did you take it?" he asked.

"I? Oh, I was twenty-five then. I had a good many hopes and a lot of pride; but there is no place for either in a working world."

"But your people?"

"My last relation died with the fortune."

"Your friends?"

Loder laid down his pipe. "I told you I was twenty-five," he said, with the tinge of humor that sometimes crossed his manner. "Doesn't that explain things? I had never taken favors in prosperity; a change of fortune was not likely to alter my ways. As I have said, I was twenty-five." He smiled. "When I realized my position I sold all my belongings with the exception of a table and a few books—which I stored. I put on a walking suit and let my beard grow; then, with my entire capital in my pocket, I left England without saying good-by to any one."

"For how long?"

"Oh, for six years. I wandered half over Europe and through a good part of Asia in the time."

"And then?"

"Then? Oh, I shaved off the beard and came back to London!" He looked at Chilcote, partly contemptuous, partly amused at his curiosity.

But Chilcote sat staring in silence. The domination of the other's personality and the futility of his achievements baffled him.

Loder saw his bewilderment. "You wonder what the devil I came into the world for," he said. "I sometimes wonder the same myself."

At his words a change passed over Chilcote. He half rose, then dropped back into his seat.

"You have no friends?" he said. "Your life is worth nothing to you?"

Loder raised his head. "I thought I had conveyed that impression."

"You are an absolutely free man?"

"No man is free who works for his bread. If things had been different I might have been in such shoes as yours, sauntering in legislative byways; my hopes turned that way once. But hopes, like more substantial things, belong to the past"—He stopped abruptly and looked at his companion.

The change in Chilcote had become more acute; he sat fingering his cigarette, his brows drawn down, his lips set nervously in a conflict of emotions. For a space he stayed very still, avoiding Loder's eyes; then, as if decision had suddenly come to him, he turned and met his gaze.

"How if there was a future," he said, "as well as a past?"

V.—A STRANGE PROPOSITION.

FOR the space of a minute there was silence in the room, then outside in the still night three clocks simultaneously chimed eleven, and their announcement was taken up and echoed by half a dozen others, loud and faint, hoarse and resonant; for all through the hours of darkness the neighborhood of Fleet street is alive with chimes.

Chilcote, startled by the jangle, rose from his seat; then, as if driven by an uncontrollable impulse, he spoke again.

"You probably think I am mad"— he began.

Loder took his pipe out of his mouth. "I am not so presumptuous," he said, quietly.

For a space the other eyed him silently, as if trying to gauge his thoughts; then once more he broke into speech.

"Look here," he said. "I came to-night to make a proposition. When I have made it you'll first of all jeer at it—as I jeered when I made it to myself; then you'll see its possibilities—as I did; then"—he paused and glanced round the room nervously—"then you'll accept it—as I did." In the uneasy haste of his speech his words broke off almost unintelligibly.

Involuntarily Loder lifted his head to retort, but Chilcote put up his hand. His face was set with the obstinate determination that weak men sometimes exhibit.

"Before I begin I want to say that I am not drunk—that I am neither mad nor drunk." He looked fully at his companion with his restless glance. "I am quite sane—quite reasonable."

Again Loder essayed to speak, but again he put up his hand.

"No. Hear me out. You told me something of your story. I'll tell you something of mine. You'll be the first person, man or woman, that I have confided in for ten years. You say you have been treated shabbily. I have treated myself shabbily—which is harder to reconcile. I had every chance—and I chucked every chance away."

There was a strained pause, then again Loder lifted his head.

"Morphia?" he said, very quietly.

Chilcote wheeled round with a scared gesture. "How did you know that?" he asked, sharply.

The other smiled. "It wasn't guessing—it wasn't even deduction. You told me, or as good as told me, in the fog—when we talked of Lexington. You were unstrung that night, and I— Well, perhaps one gets overobservant from living alone." He smiled again.

Chilcote collapsed into his former seat and passed his handkerchief across his forehead.

Loder watched him for a space; then he spoke. "Why don't you pull up?" he said. "You are a young man still. Why don't you drop the thing before it gets too late?" His face was unsympathetic, and below the question in his voice lay a note of hardness.

Chilcote returned his glance. The suggestion of reproof had accentuated his pallor. Under his excitement he looked ill and worn.

"You might talk till doomsday, but every word would be wasted," he said, irritably. "I'm past praying for, by something like six years."

"Then why come here?" Loder was pulling hard on his pipe. "I'm not a dealer in sympathy."

"I don't require sympathy." Chilcote rose again. He was still agitated, but the agitation was quieter. "I want a much more expensive thing than sympathy—and I am willing to pay for it."

The other turned and looked at him. "I have no possession in the world that would be worth a fiver to you," he said, coldly. "You're either under a delusion or you're wasting my time."

Chilcote laughed nervously. "Wait," he said. "Wait. I only ask you to wait. First let me sketch you my position—it won't take many words:

"My grandfather was a Chilcote of Westmoreland; he was one of the first of his day and his class to recognize that there was a future in trade, so, breaking his own little twig from the family tree, he went south to Wark and entered a ship-owning firm. In thirty years' time he died, the owner of one of the biggest trades in England, having married the daughter of his chief. My father was twenty-four and still at Oxford when he inherited. Almost his first act was to reverse my grandfather's early move by going north and piecing together the family friendship. He married his first cousin; and then, with the Chilcote prestige revived and the shipping money to back it, he entered on his ambition, which was to represent East Wark in the Conservative interest. It was a big fight, but he won—as much by personal influence as by any other. He was an aristocrat, but he was a keen business man as well. The combination carries weight with your lower classes. He never did much in the House, but he was a power to his party in Wark. They still use his name there to conjure with."

Loder leaned forward interestedly.

"Robert Chilcote?" he said. "I have heard of him. One of those fine, unostentatious figures—strong in action, a little narrow in outlook, perhaps, but essential to a country's staying power. You have every reason to be proud of your father."

Chilcote laughed suddenly. "How easily we sum up, when a matter is impersonal! My father may have been a fine figure, but he shouldn't have left me to climb to his pedestal."

Loder's eyes questioned. In his newly awakened interest he had let his pipe go out.

"Don't you grasp my meaning?" Chilcote went on. "My father died and I was elected for East Wark. You may say that if I had no real inclination for the position I could have kicked. But I tell you I couldn't. Every local interest, political and commercial, hung upon the candidate being a Chilcote. I did what eight men out of ten would have done. I yielded to pressure."

"It was a fine opening!" The words escaped Loder.

"Most prisons have wide gates!" Chilcote laughed again unpleasantly. "That was six years ago. I had started on the morphia tack four years earlier, but up to my father's death I had it under my thumb—or believed I had; and in the realization of my new responsibilities and the excitement of the political fight I almost put it aside. For several months after I entered Parliament I worked. I believe I made one speech that marked me as a coming man." He laughed derisively. "I even married"——

"Married?"

"Yes. A girl of nineteen—the ward of a great statesman. It was a brilliant marriage—politically as well as socially. But it didn't work. I was born without the capacity for love. First the social life palled on me; then my work grew irksome. There was only one factor to make life endurable—morphia. Before six months were out I had fully admitted that."

"But your wife?"

"Oh, my wife knew nothing—knows nothing. It is the political business, the beastly routine of the

Chilcote moved a small table nearer the couch and spread his hands upon it, palm downward.